COMMUNICATING FEMINISM TO THE COMMUNITY: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF FEMINISM FIFTY YEARS AFTER 9 AUGUST 1956

Engela Pretorius*

ABSTRACT

The history of women in South Africa is the history of their oppression due to patriarchy - a system of domination which still persists in South Africa, and has done so since pre-colonial times. However, in the case of black women, it has been justly argued that under apartheid they suffered from the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classism which characterises the country's history. Although opposition to patriarchy has not so much been in evidence among black women in this country, they do indeed have a history of strong opposition to the politicisation of race. This article traces the historical development of feminism in this country, focusing on African feminism(s) and its multiple manifestations. The role of feminism in the liberation struggle is then explicated by first describing the variety and diversity of patriarchies, followed by an exposition of the surfacing of political consciousness among women in this country. The article concludes that 50 years after the momentous event of 9 August 1956, an active and feminist voice in civil society is still needed due to factors such as the fact that the struggle for gender equity has to a large extent become a state-led venture, and because of what is perceived as a hardening of patriarchies.

* Professor Engela Pretorius is Vice-Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of the Free State.

INTRODUCTION

This year we celebrate 12 years of democracy. More importantly, 9 August marks 50 years since the historic protest march, mainly by black women in defiance of yet another immoral act of the erstwhile apartheid regime. The history of women in South Africa is the history of their oppression due to patriarchy - a system of domination which still persists in South Africa, and has done so since pre-colonial times. However, in the case of black women[1], it has been justly argued that under apartheid they suffered from the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classism which characterises the country's history (Flepp 1985). Although opposition to patriarchy has not so much been in evidence among black women in this country, they do indeed have a history of strong opposition to the politicisation of race. According to Bernstein (1985: 115), before 1994, certain contradictions characterised the lives of African women. On the one hand, their status was one of deprivation and oppression; yet, on the other, "… they emerged with militancy and confidence, with persistency and strength, in the struggle." This was particularly evident, for example, in the mobilisation against Pass legislation[2] in the 1950s. Even though their protests ultimately did not succeed in their objective of preventing the imposition of passes, their actions are remembered and celebrated every year on Woman's Day. Women from the other population groups, such as Afrikaner women, have a less well-known history of protest, which also did not yield the desired results. Yet, despite the failed protests in this country, there has remained a sense of confidence in the ability of women to be agents of social change (Miller 1998).

This article traces the historical development of feminism in this country, particularly emphasising its role in the liberation struggle with a view to pointing out the relevance of the women's movement in South African communities 50 years after the momentous event of 9 August 1956.

DEFINING FEMINISM

The word "feminism" conjures up many images and elicits many reactions, oftentimes negative ones. Verbal abuse is common, but in extreme cases the reactions become violent as is illustrated by an incident that happened at the University of Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique in 1987, when 27 women were shot and fourteen of them died. All but one of the dead women had been students in Engineering. Their killer, who later committed suicide, considered himself "a rational erudite". He had shouted, before the first six women were killed, "You're all a bunch of feminists and I hate feminists". The terrible irony of this is that most women engineers are not feminists at all (Scanlon in Delamont 2003: 12). What this illustrates is the power of feminist ideas which provoke either fear, or loathing or misogyny.

The term "feminism" suggests a single ideology, but in reality it is a broad term for a variety of conceptions of the relations between men and women in society. Due to historical precedents, the current legal status of women in certain countries and certain other factors, feminist ideology has been compelled to move in different directions to achieve its goals. As a result, there are many different kinds of feminism. Essentially,

feminists question and challenge the origins of oppressive gender relations and attempt to develop a variety of strategies that might change these relations for the better. Even though feminists share the same ideas in terms of what gender oppressions might mean, they differ widely in terms of analysing the origin of such oppression and in determining what precisely constitutes women's liberation (Mannathoko 1992: 71).

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM

The history of feminism is generally divided into three broad phases, referred to as "waves". First Wave feminism is generally said to have begun in the 19th century. It focused on securing for women rights in public spheres, in particular the right to vote, the right to education and the right to entry into middle-class occupations and professions, such as medicine. The liberal heritage is quite evident in these quests. The originator of the movement for women's rights was the English author and social reformer, Mary Wollstonecraft. Her major work, *A vindication of the rights of women* published in 1792, argued for better education and political equality for women. She argued that if women were not capable of rationality and reason, it was due to their lack of proper education and the way that they were socialised to be passive, emotional and helpless: "I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative" (Wollstonecraft 1996: 43). Yet, it was not only women who held feminist ideas. The philosophical standpoint of British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, addressed the issues raised by Wollstonecraft in his book, *On the subjection of women* (1869), arguing that the natural justice accorded men, should be extended to include women. In 1867 he introduced to Parliament 1449 signatures on a woman suffrage petition as an amendment to the Reform Bill of that year. The amendment failed. Only in 1918 did the Representation of the People Act give the vote to certain groups and classes of women. Parliamentarian Merriman described the enfranchisement of women as "a case of democracy gone mad". Finally, in 1928, British women won equal voting rights with men (Gaidzwana 1992; Hughes 2002; Walker 1990).

Britain was the power which colonised most of the countries in Southern Africa. Thus, the colonial gender politics in Southern Africa closely mirrored those of Britain, in that suffrage was extended first to those who were privileged on the basis of gender, namely white men, then to a few men of the labouring classes or races, next to white women and lastly to black women.

In South Africa, white women in the Cape Province were given the vote in 1929 in order to neutralise the effects of a qualified franchise granted to black men of education and property (Gaidzanwa 1992). As in the case of the United States, when it came to standing up for black people's right to vote, white English and Afrikaans/Afrikaner suffragists' commitment to anti-racist politics turned out to be thin – so that racial and class interests tended to prevail when the chips were down.

The Second Wave (1960s) is generally thought of as having been introduced by Betty Friedan's publication, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It was concerned, on the one hand, with social reform, such as free school meals for poor children, and health care for poor women; on the other, it was concerned with a "revolution" in the private sphere in respect of, inter alia, a demand for the right to contraception and the end of the sexual double standard. Early second-wave feminism is particularly remembered for how it theorised motherhood as an oppressive institution (Hughes 2002).

Two key slogans emerged during this time (1970s): the first was "the personal is political". The slogan was first used by civil rights and New Left activists and then articulated with more depth and consistency by feminist activists. The idea behind the slogan is that many issues that have historically been deemed "personal" – abortion, battery, unemployment, birth, death, and illness – are actually deeply political issues (Thompson 2002). The second slogan was "sisterhood is powerful". Both slogans implicitly endorsed the idea that women were universally oppressed and exploited and that only through recognition of this common situation could women change the structures that oppressed them. An argument of Engels to the effect that in marriage women are the proletariat and men the bourgeoisie, was popular even among those not particularly sympathetic to Marxism (Evans 1997: 11).

Third Wave feminism, from 1980s to the present, has again been concerned with public issues (equal pay, an end to gender discrimination in employment, pensions, mortgages, etc.) and with making formerly private issues (such as rape and domestic violence) matters of public concern and reform (Delamont 2003). A major aspect of the third wave of feminist theorising is postmodernist feminism, which underscores diversity and difference. Proponents of postmodern feminism are critical of the work done in the 1960s and 1970s, in that it was characterised by a generalised, monolithic concept of "woman" as a generic category in stratification. Postmodern feminism therefore focuses on the factual and theoretical implications of differences among women (Lengerman & Niebrugge-Brantley 1992: 480). The critical effort of these feminists is aimed not only at gender ideology and the unequal status of women, but more broadly at all systems of domination – sexist, racist, classist, heterosexist and imperialist. It is also critical of the false consciousness that has led middle-class, white, heterosexual women to use the term "woman" as a monolithic category in opposing male domination while actually ignoring their own acts of domination toward women who do not share their class, race and affectional preference. However, feminists are not in agreement when it comes to accepting postmodern feminism. There are those who "… hesitate before the brink of full postmodernism" (Delamont 2003: 144). These women (some African-American) point out that the origins of postmodernism lies in post-war Paris among white men (such as Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard) who are or were misogynist, sexist and in Foucault's case, even gay. Brodribb (in Delamont ibid.) states: "postmodernism is the cultural capital of late patriarchy". Others, like Sandra Harding, argue in favour of adopting a postmodern position, stating that it has the most intellectual power of any feminist perspective yet devised (Delamont 2003). According

to Klopper (1996), the postmodern premise is that the power to emancipation lies precisely in women's marginal existence and in their privileged position of being different from the fallacious norm.

TENSIONS IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

During the mid-1980s, the term "postfeminism" began to appear in the media. At the heart of postfeminism is the implication that feminism is over. It began to be significantly present as a concept in 1991 when Susan Faludi published *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*. This book acknowledged the concept and from a feminist point of view, tried to dispel it as a media-inspired attitude that feminism was passé because women had arrived at their goals. The truth of the matter was that a massive mainstream defence of the status quo was actually producing the ideology of postfeminism. By the 1990s, several highly articulate, anti-feminist, but assertive independent women were attacking feminism and/or proclaimed postfeminism as appropriate and established. What they were experiencing was the lack of an energetic and robust political movement, the lack of an identity, that of "woman", with which to align, and the perception of restrictive and detrimental positions associated with feminism – this while many of the concerns of women about equality, free expression, power, respect, and sexual subjectivity were still present and compelling.

Also expressing discontent during third wave feminism are "women of colour". They have been responsible for a trajectory of critique, challenging the hegemony of feminisms constructed primarily around the lives of white, middle-class women. They reject the concept of global sisterhood because to them it pre-supposes "an original, mother feminism" (Msimang 2002). They also challenge the common notion that women-of-colour feminists emerged in reaction to - and therefore later - than white feminism, stating that Black feminist organising and white feminist activism occurred virtually simultaneously (Thompson 2002).

According to Thompson (2002), "hegemonic feminism" is white led; it marginalises the activism and world-views of women of colour, it focuses mainly on the United States and it treats sexism as the ultimate oppression. Hegemonic feminism is rejected because it deemphasises or ignores a class and race analysis, generally sees equality with men as the goal of feminism, and has an individual, rights-based, rather than a justice-based vision for social change.

The feminism of women of colour are characterised by varied concerns, they adopt multiple intellectual stances, and are depicted by different terms. Apart from *multiracial feminism*, terms used for the feminism of women of colour are *multicultural feminism*, *Third World feminisms*, *indigenous feminisms*, *Black feminism* and *African feminisms* (Zinn & Dill 1997). One should, however, immediately caution that each of these categorisations should not be treated either as a single analytical framework, or its principle architects – women of colour – as an undifferentiated category. These terms tend to homogenise vastly different experiences and can falsely universalise experiences across race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age.

In the South African context the term "African feminisms" has come to be accepted and it is to an explication of this brand of feminism that we now turn.

AFRICAN FEMINISM[S]: MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS

African feminism signifies a protest against the white/western history of and also white/western domination within feminism. African women have long realised that their oppression is different from that of white women, and thus necessitates a different process of liberation. However, western feminism failed to recognise and incorporate this difference in the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, thereby alienating many women of colour in the process. Jayawardena (in Msimang 2002: 6) thus articulates this critique:

> It has been variously alleged that...feminism is a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism; that is based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World; that it is the ideology of a local bourgeoisie; and that it alienates or diverts women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities on the one hand, and from the revolutionary struggles for national liberation and socialism on the other.

Western feminism's subsequent practice of "adding on" black women to existing feminist ontology is likewise regarded as inadequate in that it does not capture black women's needs. Many black activist women have therefore fought to give a voice to their unique experiences of slavery, colonialism, male oppression and poverty.

From the above, it is apparent that African feminism emphasises the necessity of taking into account the material circumstances and cultural histories of African societies. The diversity of these social realities on the African continent has had a lasting effect on conceptions of feminism, making it necessary to use the plural, i.e. feminisms, in respect of feminism in Africa. Nonetheless, one is able to identify certain broad generic characteristics of African feminisms (Arndt 2002):

- The idea of a cooperation or complementarity with men and the affirmation of motherhood and the family.

- The concern to criticise patriarchal manifestations in African societies in a differentiated way. This means above all that African feminisms consider precisely which traditional institutions are agreeable and positive for women, or at least can or could be, and which of them disadvantage women so severely that their abolition seems imperative. This careful consideration has much to do with the position of many African feminists, namely that the criticism of African societies inherent in the criticism of African gender relationships weakens Africa's position vis-à-vis the West, as well as African resistance to Western cultural imperialism.

- African feminisms aim at discussing gender roles in the context of other oppressive mechanisms such as racism, neocolonialism, (cultural) imperialism, socio-economic exclusion and exploitation, gerontocracy, religious fundamentalism,

as well as dictatorial and/or corrupt systems. With this approach, African theories of feminism by far exceed even the race-class-gender approach of African-American feminism in scope.

- Many African feminists not only criticise patriarchal structures, but they also attempt to identify both traditionally-established and entirely new scopes and alternatives for women to overcome their oppression.

Many African women and men are repulsed by the term "feminism". Thus, many Black African men consider gender to be a divisive concept imported from the West to "enslave" African women, and to alienate them from African men and, ultimately, the general struggle against racism. In the same vein, many African women initially reject feminism, perceiving it to be a western ideology imported to Africa to ruin the family structure. As such, the labelling of "*African* feminism" is regarded as an oxymoron, an anomaly or an incongruity (Kolawole 2002). These sets of views and perceptions have compelled several women to conceptualise African alternatives to the Western concept of "feminism". The best-known alternative is the concept of "womanism" or "African/Africana womanism" (Hudson-Weems; Kolawole; Ogunyemi; Walker). Other neologisms are Ogundipe-Leslie's *stiwanism* - acronym of *Social Transformations Including Women in Africa* - and Nnaemeka's negofeminism - feminism of negotiation (Wikipedia 2006). Those writers/activists who use the term "African feminism" do so to express the ambivalence of, on the one hand, being located within the network of a global feminism, and, on the other, the emergence of foci and concepts from the concrete social and cultural constellations of African societies.

"Womanism" has become the most favoured alternative for feminism. It emerged as an explicit race critique of feminism. According to Gqola (in Aniagolu 1998) "womanism asserts a hard-line pro-black position, (and) is in favour of the positive representation of black people as a whole". This "hard-line, pro-Black" stance was demonstrated at the first *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora Conference* held in Nigeria in 1992. Here, there were obvious differences between the views of African women and women of the diaspora on the issue of whether white women should be allowed at the conference or not. The black Diaspora feminists decided to boycott panels with white participants and viewed the conciliatory stance of conveners as betrayal (Opara 1998). The Nigerian hosts felt that excluding the whites, their visitors, from the conference was contrary to the Igbo tradition which avows that a friendly visitor is never rejected/"pushed out in the rain" (Okpala & Ogbanna-Ohuche 1998). The German, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen (1998), described the tactics used by some African-Americans to intimidate and abuse white participants as appalling, stating that she had never experienced that kind of hostility from an African, or from an African-American fully conversant and in harmony with the African culture. Kolawole (2002: 96) also plays down race, stating that "African" does not only include blacks: "Any person, male or female, who has the legal citizenship of a nation located on the African continent is an African."

Other characteristics of womanism emphasise cultural contextualisation, the centrality of the family and the importance of including men (Kolawole 2002). It has, however, been accused of condoning black male patriarchy and therefore not advancing women. To Kolawole (2002) the rejection of womanism by Western scholars reveals a lack of sensitivity to the way of thinking of Black African women. In her opinion womanism is here to stay as an option preferred by many of these women. She does not regard this stance as dividing the struggle, but as providing an increase in diversities and options.

FEMINISM AND LIBERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Having conceptualised and explicated feminism in all its diversity, it is now linked to the struggle for liberation in this country.

Women's subordinate status in South Africa: A tapestry of patriarchy

The history of women in this country is the history of their oppression due to patriarchy. This system of domination still exists in South Africa, and has done so since pre-colonial times. In this regard, the analogy of a patchwork quilt (Bozzoli 1983:149) or of a tapestry (Finnemore & Cunningham 1995:188) is often used to describe the variety and diversity of patriarchies. Thus, women from different races, cultures and classes have found themselves located in different scenes within the tapestry and have experienced patriarchy in different forms and degrees of severity.

African women and pre-colonial patriarchy

Before the arrival of the European settlers, black women were the tillers of the fields. They were also responsible for producing children - the future labour force. Women's reproductive and productive capacities were highly valued. The patriarchal system that existed in these rural communities ensured that these capacities were controlled and appropriated by males. The chief, being the hierarchical head, was entitled to the greatest appropriation. Decision-making was the prerogative of the chief and his advisors. Women had little say over marriage choices as these decisions were dominated by men.

However, women were highly valued and were accorded significant status in the community. A web of traditional customs and practices provided security within their homes. Traditional African society accepted women as equal producers in the self-subsistent economy and they were therefore given access to their own productive land, they possessed livestock and controlled the products of their labour. Though subordinate to men, they were no more dependent on them than men were on women. Under colonialism, customary law and administration were codified by the courts. The result was that black women were relegated to the position of perpetual minors, unable to transact any business, or own any property (Finnemore & Cunningham 1995; Meer 1985). According to Bernstein (1985) African women were not – despite their background in patriarchy – as subservient as many of their counterparts in some parts of Asia and Africa. Thus, these women played a notable part in many anti-colonial struggles before the demise of the traditional era.

Afrikaner women: Man-made women

Both the Dutch and the British settlers reinforced patriarchal values in South Africa. Even though the initial hardships of frontier life placed demands on women that often fell far outside the expected private realm of womanhood and family, the stereotypical conception of the role of women nevertheless persisted.

For Dutch women, their involvement in the Great Trek, where they fought side by side with men, as well as their sufferings during the Boer War, whether in internment camps or on deserted farms, was ultimately romanticised and idealised by male writers. According to Brink (1990), it was a deliberately constructed ideal, the work of male cultural entrepreneurs who created an ideology of women, consisting of a set of images of women, centred mainly on their nurturing and home-making roles. One such a male was the writer CJ Langenhoven who wrote an article in 1909 encapsulating this viewpoint (Walker 1990: 339). Although devised by men to counter the impacts of the intense social changes of the early 20th century, women ultimately not only accepted these images, but also produced them. Thus the *volksmoeder,* characterised by self-sacrifice*,* patriotism, religious commitment, determination, energy, courage, desire to serve one's fellow beings and a responsibility to use reproductive powers to ensure the development of the *volk*, became part and parcel of an Afrikaner nationalist mythology. It clearly defined a socially, morally, economically and politically subordinate place for Afrikaner women within society. The *volksmoeder* ideal promoted a dependent position for women, as participants in the lives of their husbands and children rather than active in their own lives. Only within this circumscribed role could women achieve social recognition (Brink 1990). The significance of this notion was that it represented the ideological incorporation of women into a male-dominated nationalism.

Both middle- and working-class women identified with the image of the idealised *volksmoeder,* but for different reasons. The *volksmoeder* ideal found resonance among middle-class women because it gave legitimacy to their role in society as wives, mothers and voluntary workers, as well as a sense of stability and purpose in a rapidly changing world.

There was, however, a contrasting reality. After the devastation of the Boer War, many young Afrikaner women were compelled to seek work in the laundry, clothing and footwear industries where they were paid and treated very poorly. These garment workers were well aware of and mostly supported the prevailing view that a woman's place was at home raising her family. However, they also recognised that women confronted with financial hardship in their families were faced with a dilemma. When a garment worker, Anna Jacobs, was disapprovingly accused by a male opponent of the union of working outside the home, she retorted: "Does it serve any purpose if we women work among the pots and the pans and these are empty? Must we fold hands and wait until food falls into the pots automatically?" (Brink 1990).

Not all Afrikaans women embraced this ideology. The feminist voice of Marie du Toit, sister of the poet, Totius, was a lone cry in the dark. She was an Afrikaans counterpart

to Olive Schreiner, but her views did not find acceptance in either middle-class or working-class Afrikaner circles. Her book *Vrou en Feminist - Of Iets oor die Vroue-Vraagstuk* published in 1921, was an attack on generally-accepted notions of womanhood. Yet, Du Toit's book is virtually unknown - it was not widely read at the time and has received little or no mention in subsequent literature on women in South Africa. As it questioned the ideological parameters of the idealised notion of Afrikaner womanhood, this is hardly surprising.

English women: Liberalising the Victorian legacy
For British women their role as housewives was dictated by Victorian middle-class values. They were proficient in running a household, skilled in needlework, inhibited in dress and manner and controlled in relationships, which were confined to private rather than public life. The frustration felt by some women with their social stereotype was articulated by Olive Schreiner, who in 1883 wrote: "[B]ut this one thought stands, never goes - if I might but be one of those born in the future, then perhaps to be born a woman will not be to be born branded" (Noome in Finnemore & Cunningham 1995: 192).

Most white, middle-class women invested their energies in charitable work, entering the so-called women's professions of teaching, nursing, and social work or supporting their husband's careers. They did not strive to enter the boardrooms of the mining and manufacturing houses, nor were they encouraged to do so. The system of the "old boys" network of exclusive clubs, the skewed education system which channelled women into domestic careers, legal impediments - such as the marital power of a husband over his wife's property and ability to enter into contracts - as well as lack of access to the corridors of power and finance, ensured that women remained in the private sphere (Finnemore & Cunningham 1995).

Women's emancipation

The white ruling class
The first recorded, albeit forgotten, example of Afrikaner women's claim for political rights in South Africa was made by a group of Voortrekker women in Natal in 1843. They wanted a promise honoured which had been made to them that they would be entitled to a voice in all matters concerning the state of this country due to their contribution to the battles in which they had fought side-by-side with their husbands. The delegation of Voortrekker women, led by Susanna Smit, told a British officer that they would rather walk bare feet over the Drakensberg than to remain under British authority. This was the only protest aimed at a foreign power. Nothing came of this claim. An ambiguous motion of the Transvaal *Volksraad* did go so far as to confer *burgherreg* (citizenship) on the wives of all burghers of the Republic in 1855, but there is no record that these women ever utilised the vote. In 1892 an attempt to extend the franchise to suitably qualified women was defeated in the legislature. JX Merriman, arch-conservative on the issue of women's rights, was applauded for his admonition that women's counsel and brandy are both assets to be used circumspectly (*Cape Debates,* 1892 in Walker 1990).

The other two occurrences of Afrikaner women protest were aimed at fellow Afrikaners from whom they differed politically. The first of these protest marches took place on 4 August 1915 during the First World War. Some Afrikaners had rebelled against South Africa's participation in this war. When one of the leaders of the rebellion, the Boer General Christiaan de Wet, was captured by government forces, a group of women decided on a protest march by means of which to pressurise the government to release the convicted rebels. Approximately 6 000 women, representing more than 65 000 women country-wide, participated in the march to the Union Buildings. They did not achieve immediate success in respect of their goal of securing the release of General de Wet as this was only realised later. What they perhaps did not realise at the time, was that this episode marked the political awakening of Afrikaner women, despite the fact that they did not have the vote as yet (Grobler 2005; Walker 1990).

It was another war 25 years on - namely World War II - which occasioned the next large women's protest march, again to the Union Buildings. On 22 June 1940, women marched in protest against South Africa's participation in this war in Europe. The then prime Minister, Jan Smuts, refused to accept the protest document, describing the march as party political propaganda. Eventually another Minister, JH Hofmeyr, met the nearly 10 000 women on behalf of the Prime Minister. Once again, the protesting women did not accomplish what they had set out to do. Naturally, the English press condemned the act, as did the pro-government Afrikaans press, calling it "a blemish on our history" (Grobler 2005:7). The Afrikaans press not supporting South Africa's participation in the war wrote of the protest in highly appreciative terms, while the organisers regarded the event to be a gilded page in the history of the Afrikaner people.

White, English-speaking women perhaps had the greatest opportunities to challenge the patriarchal system. Access to education was more available and desired; their exposure to more liberal values allowed more latitude to challenge patriarchal practices. Liberal women who broke with the mould were to play a major role in securing the franchise for white women in South Africa in 1930. The progress of the suffrage campaign was a particularly visible measure of the adjustment in attitudes towards women. By 1930 motherhood was no longer seen as incompatible with political equality and female virtue was no longer coterminous with staying at home all one's life. The tight controls on women's independent standing prevalent in pre-industrial white society had loosened considerably. However, the fact that white women were granted formal political equality did not in any way represent a revolution in male-female relations. According to Walker (1990), the principle of supreme male authority over the household, though less securely rooted than in the 19th century, remained unchecked: Victorian gender organisation persisted unchecked.

The suffrage movement also highlighted the lack of gender loyalty on the part of white women - their primary identification was with their own community, class and colour. Thus, among white women, ethnic loyalty to their own language group took first place, proving a major obstacle to the establishment of an organisation representative of both English and Afrikaner suffragists. Moreover, while up until 1930 white and black

women had shared a common oppression of patriarchal domination, the difference in status and opportunities between black and white women was to widen considerably in subsequent years. However, some liberal women did play a role in black women's emancipation throughout the struggle years. In 1944, during a boycott of seven weeks against a rise in bus fares, some middle-class white women drove to and from the township of Alexandra, providing black women with transport. During the campaign against the introduction of "Bantu Education" in 1955, white women – mostly teachers – also participated. The most notable such women were Ray (Alexander) Simons, Helen Joseph and Helen Suzman. A number of women's organisations were established as a result of white women's concern at the Soweto uprisings in 1976, such as *Women for Peace* convened by Mrs Harry Oppenheimer. The best-known and most active organisation among white women was the Black Sash anti-apartheid women's movement, established in 1955 to protest against the removal of Coloured voters from the common role (Bernstein 1985). Nelson Mandela (1990) described this movement as the conscience of white South Africa.

Disenfranchised black women
Political consciousness among African women surfaced earlier than among their white sisters and resulted in the establishment of the Bantu Women's League in 1913. This organisation preceded the ANC Women's League which was established in 1948 and which played a leading role in the liberation struggle and the establishment of the democratic dispensation in South Africa.

At best, the organised suffrage movement approached the situation of black women from the perspective of charity, and not of sisterly solidarity. In order to preserve their existing privileges, white women had to close ranks with white men as a class and what is more, white women often shared with white men in the exploitation of blacks. Therefore, there are hardly any examples of white women including black women in their struggle for suffrage. The only recorded time that the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU) was addressed by a black woman, was in 1921, when Charlotte Maxeke, a prominent social worker and founder of the Bantu Women's League, was invited to speak at its annual conference (Walker 1990: 329). Her address was socially rather than politically oriented as she did not speak on the suffrage, but on the devastating conditions of life among African women in the towns. This is interpreted by Meer (1985), Walker (1990) and Hassim (in Lewis 1994) as a lack of a gender or feminist consciousness. However, Boyce Davies (in Bonner 1990) states that traditions of resistance and activism among African women go back to pre-colonial times; in other words, she contends that there were indigenous "feminisms" prior to contact with Europeans, just as there were indigenous modes of rebellion and resistance throughout the period of colonial domination. This aspect will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Whatever the point of view in this regard, the fact of the matter is that South African women were not *organised* along gender lines, mainly as a consequence of class and race factors (Meer 1985). Critics such as Spivak and Minh-ha (in Lewis 1994) have

argued that gendered experiences are always affected by racial and class identities. Thus, the social definitions of "woman" and "man" cannot be explained independently of racial, class or regional affiliations; the gendered social subject is never simply "woman" or "man", but always "black woman", "white man", "first-world woman" and so on. In contexts where oppression takes a variety of forms, and where the subjection of individuals derives from different relations of power and exploitation, it becomes extremely difficult to specify any single form of oppression as dominant. This results in the incorrect assumption that gender struggles - because they are so inextricably bound up with other political struggles - are absent.

The particular brand of feminism that developed among black women was one which recognised a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. In 1985 Meer had stated that "[a]s long as racism continues and a people, not a particular sex, is the object of oppression, the women will continue to overlook their own discrimination and dedicate themselves to the liberation of their people". Steady (Kolawole 2002: 94) concurs that for African women the struggle against gender oppression has always been "…fused with liberation from other forms of oppression, namely slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, poverty, illiteracy, and disease".

This subordination of sectional demands – such as women's emancipation – in black nationalist movements was mirrored in the nationalist ideology of the overriding struggle of the Afrikaner people against British imperialism (Walker 1990: 19).

Among the Asian population, it was women from two *ashrams*[3] from the then Natal and Transvaal[4] who transformed the elitist Indian Resistance Movement, initiated by Ghandi, into a mass movement. In 1912 they defied the anti-Asiatic law and were instrumental in provoking the miners of Newcastle, a town in the province of Natal, to go on a strike. Then followed an epic march by a thousand workers and led by Ghandi. In 1946 the South African Indian Congress launched a passive resistance campaign against an act which aimed at limiting the Asian community from occupying land. Bernstein (1985) views the Passive Resistance Campaign to have been of particular importance for the political advancement of women as six of the 17 people who initiated the campaign were women. Women did not participate in the campaign in significant numbers – 300 of the 2000 arrested were women. What is, however, more significant than mere numbers, is the fact that their participation was carried forward into the campaigns of the 1950s.

Women's role in the national liberation struggle
The decade of the 1950s was a decade of turmoil in South Africa. In the urban areas, a strong alliance was being forged between racially-oppressed groups and sympathetic whites. The non-racial Congress Alliance organised bus boycotts, stay-at-homes- and rent strikes in the African townships – their most significant campaign being the one against the pass laws, and in particular the extension of reference books to African women.

As has already been indicated, protest against the pass laws was not an innovation of the 1950s. What was significant about the 1950s was that the primary catalysts of the anti-pass protests were not the traditional male leaders, but thousands of African women, many of whom had never before been involved in political protests or demonstrations. The militancy of the women, their level of organisation in the urban areas, and the ease with which they discarded their expected subordinate role came as a shock to many of the men and even to some of the women. As the women's campaigns gathered strength, the ANC National Executive Committee pointedly acknowledged the role of women in the liberation struggle. According to Schmidt (1983), "[i]t was obvious, from the wording of its statements, that the importance of women to the struggle had not previously been assumed". In its report to the Annual Conference of December 17-18, 1955, the ANC National Executive Committee remarked that the ANC Women's League, which was formed in part to "take up special problems and issues affecting women", was not just an auxiliary to the African National Congress, but an ally without which liberation could not be won (Schmidt 1983).

As was the case forty years before, the women's anti-pass protests of the 1950s began in the Orange Free State. However, it was a meeting in Langa township outside Cape Town on 4 January 1953, where hundreds of men and women assembled to protest against the impending application of the Native Laws Amendment Act, that signalled the beginning of the women's campaign. Subsequently, preparations were made throughout the Union of South Africa for the first non-racial National Conference of Women, to be held in Johannesburg in April 1954. Here the Federation of South African Women was formed and the Women's Charter written. It included the first comprehensive set of statements on gender from within the national liberation movement. The charter affirmed the participation of women and men in the fight against racial laws, and went on to identify the intersecting gender oppression that affected women's struggles. The charter included the following emphases:

- The participation of women in the struggles of anti-apartheid organisations and trade unions - domains formerly restricted to men.

- Patriarchal attitudes and structures trapped women in domesticity and restricted their participation. The charter asserted that women should no longer play the passive, auxiliary or accommodative roles that had characterised their political involvement between 1913 and the 1940s, and that there should be equal rights for men and women (Lewis 1994).

The Women's Charter was ultimately incorporated into the Freedom Charter in 1955.

The second major demonstration was on 9 August 1956, when 20 000 women from all parts of South Africa staged a march on the Union Buildings. The Prime Minister, who had been notified of the women's mission, was not there to receive them. They left bundles of petitions containing more that 100 000 signatures at the Prime Minister's door. They concluded their demonstration by singing freedom songs, including a new one, composed especially for the occasion:

Wathint' abafazi (Now you have touched the women)

Wathint' imbokodo (You have struck a rock)

The last anti-pass demonstration took place in March 1960. On April 8 the ANC and the PAC were banned under the terms of the newly-passed Unlawful Organisations Act. On October 26 1962, the Government announced that all African women aged 16 and over, would be required to carry reference books as of February 1 1963. By that time the ANC Women's League had been outlawed and the Federation of South African Women had effectively ceased to exist. Much of their leadership had been banned, banished or imprisoned. The women's Anti-pass Campaign had lasted for more than a decade. Tens of thousands of women had participated in the resistance, forcing the Government to delay for eleven years the mandatory extension of reference books to African women. They had resisted the implementation of laws which threatened the very core of their existence – their position in society, their ability to provide for their children, and their capacity to create for their husbands and children a stable and secure family life. The women had clung to their last remaining freedom – the freedom of movement – with a tenacity unparalleled in other struggles. Although they were defeated in their immediate objective – the repeal of pass laws affecting women – the women had won a major victory. They had gained their rightful place in the struggle for national liberation, on an equal footing with men (Schmidt 1983).

Two perspectives

From one perspective, the women's role in national liberation signifies the emergence of African women's proto-feminist politics. Brooks (2003) defines *proto-feminist politics* as those struggles waged by black women against discrimination before coalescing into a more formal feminist movement.

From another perspective, black women's political activity, being located within a masculinist national liberation struggle, is depicted as "womanist" (Lewis 1994). Many individuals and organisations have acknowledged indebtedness to the concept of "womanism", such as the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s. The movement fore-grounded masculinity and was avowedly "womanist" in the sense of advocating that "motherhood [be directed] towards the fulfilment of the Black people's social, cultural, economic and political aspirations" (Rambally in Lewis 1994: 169). Many of the ANC Women's League pronouncements on women's role in politics have endorsed womanist claims by concentrating on women's nurturing role *vis-à-vis* black men and children.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that black women have always been victims of patriarchy, or that women's political mobilisation and struggle focused exclusively on race or class oppression. It is evident that since the inception of the ANC, black women did not passively comply with the requirements of this male-dominated organisation (Lewis 1994). On the contrary – the creation of space for women within the ANC, e.g. by establishing the Bantu Women's League within the organisation in 1914, shows that women's political potential was taken seriously. This was, of course, after the Anti-pass Campaign of 1913 and black women's active demands for a political role. However, after the Anti-pass Campaign of the early 1900s

up to the 1940s, women in the ANC did not play a major role. They were accorded only auxiliary membership in Congress, and the Bantu Women's League declined as a driving force after the pass issue died down.

While the weak status of the Bantu Women's League after the pass campaign suggests that African women easily accommodated themselves to male domination in Congress, one cannot conclude that black women lacked any self-awareness. What is important is that black women successfully resisted the regulations to which black men were subjected. The ANC Women's League (ANCWL), constituted in 1943, was a result of women being granted full memberships status in the ANC. The Government's renewed attempt to introduce passes for women in the 1950s, gave the ANCWL a focus for independent political action. The ANCWL therefore played a prominent role in the Defiance Campaign by dominating the anti-pass protests. The formation of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954 was a direct result of the perceived need to consolidate anti-pass action and to mobilise a wider range of women (Lewis 1994).

During the anti-pass actions of the 1950s, women confronted not only the intransigence of the state which stepped up its repression, but also the suspicion and frequent hostility of ANC men. The formation and activities of the Women's League and the Federation of South African Women are therefore milestones in the South African women's movement: black women forged active and independent political roles, often defying male assumptions of superiority, while simultaneously challenging the racial laws of the state.

CONCLUSION: POST-NATIONALIST RECONSTRUCTION AND BEYOND

For most of the anti-apartheid struggle, gender was a secondary issue, the idea being that it would be addressed properly after liberation from apartheid. Unlike many women's organisations in the first world, black women's movements in South Africa rarely evolved independently of race and class mobilisation. Thus, the feminism that has developed here emerged out of women's deep engagement with and commitment to national liberation. According to Mama (2003), pride can be taken in the success of the South African women's movement in the transition to democracy as the women involved in this movement managed to escape the fate of many women in post-nationalist reconstruction, namely that they are marginalised by it. It did not happen here. In this country gender equity concerns have been introduced into the democratic debate so that in this point in time, women's demands are made on the grounds of democracy and not in terms of the demands or the internal consistency of national liberation. In addition, these claims are now articulated independently of the ANC by means of the Women's National Coalition (WNC), a national representative structure for the women's movement. This structure was instrumental in mainstreaming gender equity into public discourse.

More than ten years into democracy women's political participation in the realm of representative government has reached more than 30%, while a range of institutions has been created to represent and defend women's interests in policy-making. This having been said, one cannot ignore certain warning signs and inadequacies of the post-

nationalist experience. Therefore, upon closer scrutiny, it would seem that institutionalisation has not, as yet, translated into what Schmitter (in Hassim 2003) calls "power advantages" - one reason being the lack of depth in respect of the institutionalisation of gender equity principles. In particular, substantive equality has not been incorporated into actual policy programmes, with the result that political statements on gender equity often remain at the level of rhetoric.

Another crucial issue raised by Hassim (2003) is the degree of autonomy and organisation of the women's movement. The relocation of key activists from the women's movement into government has changed the struggle for gender equity into a state-led project. One consequence of this development is that areas of change that lie beyond the limits of the state are neglected. So, for example, in spite of the legislative framework in respect of violence against women, there are numerous social practices and cultural norms that legitimise male violence. This, she contends, can only be addressed by an active and feminist voice in civil society.

To what extent a feminist movement outside the state is feasible, is cause for concern. Msimang (2002: 15) perceives what she calls a hardening of African patriarchies, while feminists regard the events surrounding the Zuma rape trial as reflecting rampant misogyny (Gqola 2006). One therefore has to concur with Hassim that the formal institutions for women within the state will not be effective in the long term, irrespective of the sophistication of their design or the amount of resources they can command, unless an effective feminist women's movement outside the state is sustained that can question and challenge the terms on which social policy is made.

The history of feminism has often indicated the backlash women experience when making headway in terms of empowerment. It is no different in this country at this point in time. Because of the "ugly and convenient use of culture against African women" (Gqola 2006) and women's continued suffering, particularly because of HIV and Aids, feminism needs to work for girls and young women - now more than ever.

Therefore, *A luta continua* - the struggle continues.

Endnotes:

1   The designation 'black' is used as a collective form for African, Indian/Asian and so-called coloured groups.

2   Pass legislation - a key instrument of apartheid and one of the main factors in the oppression of women – involved a system of regulation of movement applied only to Africans. This was enforced by means of pass documents (reference books) which had to be carried. In 1955 the then Minister of Native Affairs stated "African women will be issued with passes as from January 1956". In 1950 the law had been amended to enable the government to introduce passes for women. Up to that point in time, only African men had been obliged to carry these passes.

3   A place of religious retreat

4   Two provinces now known as KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

REFERENCES

Aina, O. 1998. African women at the grassroots: The silent partners of the women's movement. In Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.) *Sisterhood: Feminisms and power – from Africa to the diaspora*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Aniagolu, C. 1998. The first African Womanist Workshop. *Agenda* 37:96-100.

Arndt, S. 2002. Perspectives on African feminism: Defining and classifying African-feminist literatures. *Agenda* 54:31-44.

Bernstein, H. 1985. *For their triumphs and for their tears – women in apartheid South Africa*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa.

Bonner, P. L. 1990. 'Desirable or undesirable Basotho women?' Liquor, prostitution and the migration of Basotho women to the Rand, 1920-1945. In Walker, C. (Ed.) 1990. *Women and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Bozzoli, B. 1983. Marxism, feminism and South African studies. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9 (2): 139-171.

Brink, E. 1990. Man-made women: Gender, class and the ideology of the *volksmoeder*. In Walker, C. (Ed.) *Women and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Brooks, P. 2003. 'But once they are organised, you can never stop them': 1950s Black women in Montgomery and Johannesburg defy men and the state. *Agenda* 58:84-97.

Delamont, S. 2003. *Feminist sociology*. London: Sage.

Du Toit, M. 1921. *Vrou en feminist – of iets oor die vroue-vraagstuk*. Pretoria: Nasionale Pers.

Evans, M. 1997. *Introducing contemporary feminist thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Finnemore, M. & Cunningham, P. 1995. Women and the workplace. In Van der Merwe, A. (Ed.) *Industrial sociology: A South African perspective*. Johannesburg: Lexikon.

Flepp, C. 1985. Women under apartheid: A triple oppression. *The Courier* (Unesco) April:14-15.

Gaidzwana, R. 1992. Bourgeois theories of gender and the study of gender issues in Southern Africa. In Meena, R. (Ed.) *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and theoretical issues*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Sapes Books.

Gqola, P. D. 2006. Bleeding on the streets of South Africa. *Mail and Guardian* 14.05.2006. http://www.mg.co.za/article [accessed 20 June 2006].

Grobler, J. 2005. Afrikanervroue se vergete protes opgediep. *Volksblad* 09.08.2005: 7.

Guy-Sheftall, B. 2003. African feminist discourse: A review essay. *Agenda* 58:31-36.

Hassim, S. 2002. 'A conspiracy of women': The women's movement in South Africa's transition to democracy. *Social Research* 69(3): 693-732.

Hassim, S. 2003. The gender pact and democratic consolidation: Institutionalizing gender equality in the South African State. *Feminist Studies* 29(3): 505-528.

Hughes, C. 2002. *Key concepts in feminist theory and research***.** London: Sage.

Jell-Bahlsen, S. 1998. WAAD Conference at ASA. In Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.) *Sisterhood, feminisms and power: From Africa to the diaspora*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Klopper, F. 1996. Feminism, the postmodern way. In Landman, C. (Ed.) *Digging up our foremothers – stories of women in Africa*. Pretoria: Unisa.

Kolawole, M.M. 2002. Transcending incongruities: Rethinking feminisms and the dynamics of identity in Africa. *Agenda* 54:92-98.

Lengermann, P.M. & Niebrugge, J. 1992. Contemporary feminist theory. In Ritzer, G. 1992. (Ed.) *Contemporary sociological theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lewis, D. 1994. Women and gender in South Africa. In Mpai, V. (Ed.) *South Africa – the challenge of change*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Sapes Books.

Mama, A. 2003. Editorial. *Feminist Africa.*
http://www.feministafrica.org/2level.html [accessed September 2004].

Mandela, N. 1990. *Address to rally in Cape Town on his release from prison* – 11 February. http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1990/release [accessed June 2006]

Mangena, O. 2003. Feminism (singular), African feminisms (plural) and the African diaspora. *Agenda* 58:98-100.

Mannathoko, C. 1992. Feminist theories and the study of gender issues in Southern Africa. In Meena, R. (Ed.) *Gender in Southern Africa – conceptual and theoretical issues*. Harare: Sapes Books.

Meer, F. 1985. Women in the apartheid society.
www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/Fatima [accessed March 2006].

Miller, M. 1998. Forms of resistance: South African women's writing during apartheid, *Hecate* 24(1): 118- 145

Msimang, S. 2002. African Feminisms II: Reflections on politics made personal. *Agenda* 54:3-15.

Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.) 1998. *Sisterhood, feminisms and power: From Africa to the diaspora*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Ogunyemi, C. O. 1985. Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary black female novel in English. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1): 63-80.

Okpala, J. & Ogbanna-Ohuche, E. 1998. Black and white: We are one, sustained by sisterly love. In Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.) *Sisterhood, feminisms and power: From Africa to the diaspora*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Opara, C. 1998. Bridges and ridges. In Nnaemeka, O. (Ed.) *Sisterhood: Feminisms and power – from Africa to the diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Secretariat for the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, Copenhagen. 1980. *The role of women in the struggle against apartheid, 1980*. http://www.anc.org.za.womenrole.html [Accessed 25 April 2005].

Schmidt, E.S. 1983. Now you have touched the women. Notes & Documents. No 6/83. http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/schmi123.html [Accessed 6 May 2003].

Thompson, B. 2002. Multiracial feminism: Recasting the chronology of second wave feminism. *Feminist Studies* 28 (2):337-360.

Walker, C. (Ed.) 1990. W*omen and gender in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Wikipedia. 2006. Third-World feminism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third-world_feminism [accessed January 2006].

Wollstonecraft, M. 1996 [originally published in 1792]. *The rights of women*. London: Phoenix.

Zinn, M.B., Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. & Messner, M.A. (Eds.) 1997. *Through the prism of difference*. *Readings on sex and gender*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Zinn, M.B., & Dill B.T. 1997. Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. In Zinn, M.B., Hondagneu-sotelo, P. & Messner, M. A. (Eds.) *Through the prism of difference*. *Readings on sex and gender*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.